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Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge, Kevin J. Vanhoozer

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Book Reviews
Markus H. McDowell,
Eleanor Daniel,
Editors

Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As If God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 313 pages + bibliography + index. Reviewed by Carl Flynn.

In *The Way of the (Modern) World*, Craig M. Gay, who serves as associate professor of interdisciplinary studies at Regent College, argues that the theological assumptions behind the politics, economics, and technology of the Western intellectual tradition have brought about a phenomenon that he calls *practical atheism*. Practical atheism, "an interpretation of human affairs that excludes the reality of God" (p. 5), is characterized by "the desire to maintain autonomous control over reality by rational-technical means" (p. 10). Secularity is the logical conclusion of practical atheism and is what troubles the author throughout this work,

particularly since so many Christian thinkers have contributed to its foundations. In fact, the way in which the church unknowingly bolsters secularity in its thought and ethics is one of the central themes in this work. Gay is also uneasy about the effect that this secularity has upon human existence. Citing Henri de Lubac, Gay suggests: "Man cannot organize the world for himself without God; without God he can only organize the world against man. Exclusive humanism is inhuman humanism" (p. 15). As a result, Gay is eager to point out instances within our secularized politics, economics, and technology where "man's inhumanity to man" is evident. Gay moves between these two concerns throughout his tale of how practical atheism has come to be the order of the day.

The opening three chapters

constitute the heart of Gay's analysis. Each chapter examines the development and current status of modern secularity as it is expressed in Western politics (chapter 1), technology (chapter 2), and economics (chapter 3). The chapters follow a similar pattern. In the first portion of each chapter, Gay unveils the worldliness of our present society with respect to the cultural element under discussion. Second, he sketches the development of this secular perspective from the beginning of modernity (the Western intellectual tradition that commences with Descartes) to the twentieth century. Third, he traces the theological developments in the Christian tradition (generally moving from the Protestant Reformation to the present) that unwittingly helped to create and perpetuate modern secularity. Gay concludes each chapter with a constructive

theological proposal designed to counter the theological and existential difficulties he sees in the mass socialization of the modern nation-state; the destructive power of technological rationality; and the depersonalizing, practical rationality of capitalism.

In chapter 4, Gay focuses on a theme in the subtext of his argument thus far—"the worldly self at the heart of modern culture" (p. 181). He asserts that the modern shift from a self that is defined in relation to external entities (e.g., the good, the true, the beautiful) to "autonomous self-creation" has created "therapeutic man," whose chief concern is personal well-being (p. 191). Gay traces this development from within and without the Christian tradition. He concludes with a corrective to our "culture of narcissism," suggesting that if self is perceived as God's creation, then people stand in the perspective within which to live meaningful lives.

Gay shifts his emphasis in chapter 5 to the church and its relationship to the modern world. The greatest "heresy" of the modern church, he suggests, is the exchange of divine authority for human autonomy. In this transaction the church has undermined itself, accommodating its theology to the secular ideologies it helped to create. Therefore, any attempts churches make to engage modern culture must take into account the dialectical relationship that necessarily exists between the church and

secular society. Gay posits that on the one hand, this relationship hinders the proclamation of the gospel in the modern climate. Yet an awareness of the relationship provides the church with creative ways to challenge the secular consensus. It is to this task that Gay turns.

In his closing chapter, Gay proposes that the way to engage modern secularity is "to give a better theological account of individuality, freedom, and personality" (p. 276). He suggests that seeing human beings as "response-able" creatures that require relationship is the first step in responding to modern notions of control, anxiety, and secularity. When people come to see themselves in this relational perspective, grounded in the fellowship of the triune God, then patience, hope, and expectation will overwhelm the despair that is so common in our time. Gay suggests that this quality of living is what the apostle Paul intends by his charge in scripture to live in, but not of, the world.

Thoughtful Christians of the Restoration heritage should seriously consider this work not only for its compelling treatment of the development of modern secularity but also for its treatment of the role that politics, economics, and technology have in the formation of persons—especially Christian persons. Understanding these two aspects of Gay's work is crucial for the life and ministry of our churches in the postmodern world.

While this book is clearly

written, it assumes the reader's familiarity with the history of philosophy and theology from the Renaissance to the present. I assigned the book to a sophomore-level introductory course, and many of the students found it too difficult to understand apart from considerable elucidation from in-class lecture, discussion, and outlines. The book would be ideal for an upper-level major course in religion or philosophy, or for a graduate-level seminar in contemporary theology or ethics.

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Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). Reviewed by John Castelein.

Here is a persuasive and moving sermon. Its text may well paraphrase John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Meaning, and the Meaning was with God, and the Meaning was God." Its theme is bold and urgent in light of the serious epistemological and hermeneutical challenges facing churches and Christians today. It is also a meticulously researched, rigorously argued, and eloquently written defense of the possibility of communicating truth in literature.

It argues that today's postmodernist deconstruction

("undoing") of authors, texts, readers, and knowledge in general can be prevented from degenerating into the total nihilistic loss of determinate meaning *only* if the presence in the universe of the Trinity revealed in the Bible is acknowledged. Meaning in the universe is at home in God, not in Derrida's chaotic language.

Vanhoozer repeatedly expresses his appreciation for the many ways in which postmodernist critics forbid us to bow before the idols of our own interpretations. He quotes extensively from Nietzsche, Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Rorty, and Fish, who help us understand how our interpretations are never "innocent." Readers are always influenced by their hunger for power over others (in pride or in violence), by their need to justify themselves at all costs (ideology), and by the vocabularies and root metaphors of their historical communities (the social construction of knowledge).

However, the resultant humility before the text, which is a good thing, should not become a humiliation of the text. As ethically responsible interpreters, Christians should oppose reduc-

ing the meaning of the text as intended by the author to the reader's projections, expectations, and desires.

Vanhoozer seeks to preserve the transcendence of the meaning in texts against hermeticists (claiming meanings apart from authors' intentions), against cynics, and against all other reductionist views. To do this, he marshals impressive support from influential thinkers such as C. S. Lewis, Emmanuel Levinas, E. D. Hirsch, George Steiner, Alvin Plantinga, John Milbank, Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Luc Marion, and Anthony Thiselton.

However, this research professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School relies mostly on J. L. Austin and John Searle's theory of speech acts to heal those components of human communication that deconstructive criticism has wounded. Metaphysically, God the Father is the "locutioner" who, by the active power of his word, can resurrect the *author* that deconstruction killed. Hermeneutically, God the Son is the "illocutioner" who, as the Word that intends to do something, can redeem the *text* that deconstruction enslaved to

meaninglessness. On the reader/reception level, God the Spirit is the "perlocutioner" who can effectively reform the *reader* into a responsible, obedient listener.

Vanhoozer's book answers the challenges of Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* and of Van Harvey's *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief*. He argues that the only way to overcome today's hermeneutic of relentless suspicion is with an Augustinian hermeneutic of faith ("I believe in order to understand"). He defends an epistemology of critical realism because it balances conviction (in the intended meaning of the text) with humility (before the message of the text).

He concludes that our model should be Luther, who resisted both pride (that seeks to overcome the text) and sloth (that seeks to avoid the text). Christians today must stand, understand, and withstand with these words: "Here I stand. So help me God. My conscience is captive to the Word of God."

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